



# the Bet

By Valerie Kurtz

**I** REMEMBER ONE of the old Greek philosophers voiced the idea that beautiful things are good things—particularly with reference to people.

Personally, I doubt that the notion was provable even in his own day; it certainly didn't hold true for Ada Barton, although she was beautiful enough; no one, philosopher, saint, or sinner, would have denied that. Her beauty was the kind which makes men a little sick from desire, simply watching her. That was Ada

Barton.

As for goodness—she was undeniably good at certain things; I'm sure they weren't what the philosopher meant.

I wasn't prepared for anything exactly like Ada in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. I arrived in mid-April. It was almost the end of the dry season, and the heat was burning-bright. I liked it—the harbor, the ancient cathedral, moss-grown and stained, like something that's been buried a



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By Donald Ryerson & James Nelson

long time; the lesser churches with their plethora of intricate stonework; the old streets, the dry, spiced air. It was like a world under glass.

I found the shop of Siam Bramachari, Hindu Antiquities, in a twisting street near the cathedral. The bells were marking three o'clock as I stepped out of the glaring sunlight into the semi-darkness of the interior. The place smelt agreeably of sandalwood and a faint incense, less agreeably of some sort of fish. A bell tinkled as the door fell to.

"Hello," I called. "Anybody here?"

"Certainly," answered a man's voice from the rear of the store. Someone stepped through a tinkling bead-curtain, bringing another whiff of fish. "Good afternoon. I am Siam Bramachari. What can I show you?"

My eyes adjusted to the twilight and I saw a short, fat Hindu wearing a wide red sash around his waist over wrinkled, slop-chest whites. He spoke the precise, toneless English of the educated East Indian, bowing as he spoke and washing his hands in the air.

I said I thought I'd look around. "A pleasure. Look as you wish."

I began to glance at a display of ivory and teak figurines and woven straw pieces. He stuck close to my elbow, but I ignored him.

"You are a stranger in Port of Spain?" he said, finally.

"Landed today."

"You are an artist, one sees."

"How did you know that?"

He giggled. "That is a sketch pad you carry under your arm."

"Oh, yes . . . yes, I paint."

"You will find Trinidad charming to paint, until the rains come, Mr. . . . uh . . ."

"Turner," I said. "—Scott Turner."

"Mr. Turner. Yes. It is lovely until next month. Then the green rain, all the rest of the year."

"The green rain . . . that sounds fairly paintable."

He giggled again. "The rain? To paint? Oh, no. It is so heavy, it comes down so, there is no vista—"

The shop bell tinkled again as the street door opened and closed, letting in a shaft of orange-white sunlight. It also let in a woman.

She was a creature of the white-and-gold outside world—white dress, a cartwheel of white straw hat, white shoes; bare, golden arms and long, golden legs. Those were the things you noticed first; then you took in the full mouth, and the dark eyes, moving in the shadows under the disc of hat . . .

Siam Bramachari had deserted me and was bowing in the path of the woman.

"Mrs. Barton! Good afternoon!"

"Good afternoon, Siam. Did my Siva get here?"

She spoke as though it didn't matter a damn whether her Siva was there or not—a cool, laconic voice that could utter sarcasms or fashion commands.

The Hindu chuckled. "Yesterday, Mrs. Barton, I took him from his

straw nest only yesterday—a most beautiful jade Siva. I will bring him to you."

"Thank you." Now she was examining me.

"But first—this is Mr. Turner. A newcomer and an artist."

"Oh. How do you do."

She appraised me without haste. Fair enough; I was taking inventory on *her*, too.

"How do you do," I said.

"Talk to him till I return, Mrs. Barton. I want him to see our Siva, too." He vanished through the curtain of beads.

The woman laughed.

"Well, Mr. Turner," she said, "we have our orders. I'm to talk to you. So, I shall. And how do you like Trinidad?"

"So far," I said, "I like it. This Siva. What is it—a statue?"

"Quite a small one. Siva is my hobby. I collect him."

"The Hindu god of destruction."

"So two hundred million people believe, Mr. Turner. Siva . . . beloved of women . . ."

"Beloved by you at least, Mrs. Barton." Bramachari was in the shop again, giggling, holding in his brown hands an exquisitely-carved, many-armed statuette done in the finest white jade I have ever seen.

Mrs. Barton took the figure in her own golden-skinned fingers. Their tips caressed the surfaces of the jade, lingered over the carvings.

"He's beautiful," I said.

Reluctantly, she surrendered the statue to the Hindu.

"Send it out, will you, Siam? Thank you. Mr. Turner . . ."

"Yes, Mrs. Barton?"

"So pleasant to meet—an artist. Will you be here long?"

"I'm afraid not. My boat leaves day after tomorrow." Then I looked up and down the golden-white length of her, the shadowed face with its full, desirable mouth, and added boldly "Unless something happens to make me change my plans."

She gave another little laugh. "Nothing ever happens here in Port of Spain, Mr. Turner. Unless, of course, we *make* it happen." She turned toward the door, then came back again, as if she had forgotten something. "Oh . . . we have our small colonial group here—English, American, French. We rather huddle together socially, I'm afraid. But most of us are at the club every afternoon, close to five. Cocktails, and so on. Do join us?"

"I'd be delighted."

"I shall be there—with my husband."

"Oh."

"Yes. You must meet him. We've been married for nearly a year."

"Is a year so long a time?"

She smiled, looking straight into my eyes.

"I'll expect to see you, then." She extended her hand, and I felt a firm pressure from warm fingers. "Good-bye."

The bell tinkled as the door closed after her. At my elbow, Siam Bramachari giggled.

"A unique woman, Mr. Turner."

He washed his hands in the air, silently, "What a passion she has for those figures of Siva!"

THE "Club" in Port-of-Spain was a blurred copy of countless other "clubs" in places like Saigon, Sierra Leone, Penang, Nairobi—places where Europeans and Americans in self-imposed exile met to drink, play cards, talk business, spread gossip, flirt with one another's wives—or husbands—and be homesick.

The bridge foursomes had been playing together too long, and even their snapping and snarling at one another's misplays had a weary, resigned tone. No one cared much about the gossip, either; the reputations of most of the persons involved already had been so well besmirched that another dab made little difference; and the flirtations were carried on with the spontaneity displayed by actors doing the same scene for the nine-hundredth night.

I don't know why any of them stayed on at Trinidad; they were obviously bored to distraction at best, introverted, bitter and malicious at worst. Possibly they feared the prospect of having to earn a living at home.

I can't say, however, that these general observations applied to Paul Barton. He was an original type. A wealthy sugar planter, graying, fiftyish, Barton had the air of a man who had judged the world and found it wanting.

"An artist, Mr. Turner?" he said,

in a disagreeable high drawl, when we were introduced. "I envy you. It must be pleasant not to have to work for a living."

"Naturally," I said. "I don't look at it that way."

I should have known, even then, that he resented me because I had met his wife in my own way, outside the circle of his influence.

"Paul!" she exclaimed. "For heaven's sake!"

Barton shrugged, turning to her slightly, a faint smile on his face. "But Ada, my dear, surely neither you nor Mr. Turner contend painting is labor—productive labor, at least."

I made up my mind not to let Barton annoy me.

"I think painting is productive," I said, mildly.

"Shall we have a drink together?" Ada suggested.

"Certainly," Barton said, "but we won't change the subject, my dear. After all, you wanted me to meet Mr. Turner, and now you won't let us talk."

She pouted her full lips like a small girl. "It's just that I can see that you'll have too many differences."

"Only one difference, so far, Mrs. Barton," I said.

"And a minor one at that, my dear." Barton seemed to have decided to be civilized.

"I just don't want to hear it, that's all. Let's go and have a drink, and talk about something else and leave this subject for another time."

Barton grimaced at me over her tawny head. Her hair was tinted like the coat of a Uganda lioness.

"The tyranny of women, Barton," I said. "Another time, then?"

He took me up on it.

"All right, Mr. Turner, we'll talk about art—your kind of work versus my kind of work—when you come to dinner. How about tomorrow night? Fifth plantation on the road to Arima."

"Thank you," I said. "I should like to."

"Now that that's settled," said Ada Barton, "shall we all have a drink?"

She steered us toward the bar as if she were afraid we might be unwilling. I could feel her strong fingers grip my arm tightly through the thin cloth.

BARTON's plantation-house was pretty palatial, I found out next evening when I arrived, via native taxi, from town. The road ran through a few patches of jungle, but the Barton place stood amid its own cane-fields, endless acres of them. The sudden tropic darkness closed in while we were eating a decent enough dinner. Afterward, native attendants served us coffee on a screened veranda. The din of frogs, out in the night, was terrific; moths and smaller insects bumped and battered against the screens.

Ada lay indolently in a long, woven-cane chair, one high-heeled gold slipper half-dangling from a slim bare foot. She wore a long

gown that was the green of shallow seas, with dull gold jewelry matching the tawny gleams of her piled hair.

"Sugar," Barton was saying, "is a necessity. But a picture on the wall—no."

"I'll agree with you on one thing," I said.

"How's that?"

"The fact that painting seldom produces, for the painter, the kind of comfort sugar makes for you, here."

"Quite so, Turner. See, your alternative is simple; get out of the painting business—if you can call anything like that a business—and into something useful, something people need."

I kept my temper. "Of course, it's necessary for me to believe that pictures are a necessity to people—something for which they're starved." I considered him over my cigar. "But I think your difference with me is more personal, Barton."

"Eh?" That one brought him up sharp. "What do you mean?"

I could sense a tautening in Ada's attention.

"You see," I said, "I think you really envy me."

"I envy you?"

"Because you're really a romantic, who never found whatever it was you came to Trinidad for."

I paused but he said nothing, and I went on "This is a beautiful island, Barton."

"In the dry season . . . yes. What of it?"

"You've built a beautiful house," I said. "You're married . . . to an extraordinarily beautiful woman."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Turner." Ada's voice was cool, ironic.

A glint leaped in Barton's eyes, for just a moment, at my reference to his wife.

I knew I was heading for trouble, and I kept on. "But you've pegged your dream, Barton, to what the morning market report has to say about the price of sugar, and your house and your . . . your life here are ashes in your mouth. You resent me, the itinerant artist—because I'm the symbol of the freedom you've lost. May I have more coffee, Mrs. Barton?"

It was a foul blow, but Barton rallied gamely. I'll never know if he saw the look his wife gave me as she poured coffee into my extended cup.

"Ashes? Why, I love it." He was talking a little too fast. "I'm a man who likes utility, organization, efficient operation. Romance, you say? Yes, and romance, too. There's plenty of romance in sugar. Where else—"

"As much as there is in a Portuguese sloop, Java-bound? Or in the avenues of Angkor Vat? Or in gulls' wings flashing over Majorca? Or, for that matter, in Port-of-Spain, tonight, with the smell of fast-growing things beyond these thin screens? That's why you envy me, Barton—because I can claim the world, while no part of it claims me!"

His face was brick-red.

"Poppycock! You know what I think? You're irresponsible, Turner. You just haven't the necessary courage to accept responsibility. You're always running away from it."

"Paul, you're insulting!" That was Ada. It was a reproof, but it went only as far as the words. She was loving it; her full mouth was set in an avid smile; she was drinking in the hardly-veiled antagonism between the two of us, myself and her husband.

"Insulting!" echoed Barton. "If it comes to insults—" He checked himself, went on in a calmer tone. "I've put in years of hard work developing this business."

"And you don't think I've worked."

"I don't think you have, Turner, and I don't think you can. I'd bet fifty thousand dollars you couldn't stick to an ordinary, useful, routine job for one year."

"You mean," I said, "what *you* call a useful job."

He pushed his cup away, poured himself a stiff jolt of Scotch and splashed soda in it.

"Whiskey?" he said.

"No thanks."

"You should try it. My dully-gotten money enables me to afford a thirty-year old liquor." He looked at me from under lowered eyelids as he went on.

"I'd be willing to put up fifty thousand dollars that you couldn't stick it out here—where you think it's so beautiful—working for me, for one solid year."

"Paul—you can't buy *everything* with your money." There it was again, the words saying one thing, the tone something entirely different. She was goading him, challenging him to try.

"I don't know," I said calmly. "Maybe he can. What kind of work, Barton?"

"You can't be serious, Mr. Turner."

Now I was getting the treatment. What she really said was "I wonder if you dare . . . ?"

"Oh, it'd be work you could do. In my laboratory. I've got some things going on tropical diseases, in addition to considerable necessary laboratory work for the sugar itself. And then, there are soil tests—things like that."

I thought the situation over. Odd—with the rich, heady seasoning of an element I couldn't wholly evaluate at the moment—Ada Barton. Lazy and seemingly passive in the long chair, she watched us.

"I'm no technician," I said disinterestedly. "I don't know a precipitate from a colloid."

He chuckled. "Oh, as to that—I'm the technician. I was something of a bacteriologist once, you know, before I became a stodgy, money-grubbing planter, Turner. Your job would be to keep routine records. You can write, I suppose . . . ?"

"For fifty thousand dollars—yes."

Outside, without my having noticed it the night noises had stilled. The moths did not bump against the screen. The tropic night was utterly

still and close.

"That's right. Fifty thousand." Barton eyed me with something that looked like amusement. "And if you quit before the end of twelve months—three hundred and sixty-five days—nothing!"

Overhead, with a suddenness no one who hasn't lived in the tropics could believe, there was a roar. Overhead, and all around us. It was like the blast of a squadron of jet-propelled planes. I'd heard it before, in other parts of the world, but I jumped, all the same.

The dry season was over in Trinidad. Rain was sluicing onto the roof of the veranda and the thirsty earth of the plantation in cloudburst quantities.

Barton did not start. His small smile broadened a fraction.

"Well?" he asked, raising his voice to be heard above the roar of the falling rain.

"It's a bet!" I said, loudly. "I'll take you, Barton. One year, for fifty thousand!" I turned to Ada. "Mrs. Barton's our witness."

She wasn't listening. She was breathing deeply of the cooling air. A rank odor of wet vegetation came off the soaked earth outside, and Ada was sniffing it in, turning her head slowly from side to side. Stretching, she brought her long body, moulded in the sea-green robe, upright in the chair.

"I feel very sleepy," she said. She nodded politely to me. "If you'll excuse me, I think I shall retire."

"On the contrary," I said, "I think

you look very wide awake."

She smiled. "Goodnight."

Barton and I watched her cross the veranda and disappear into the gloom of the indoors. He, too, was still smiling, as he turned to me.

"What do you think of our rain, Turner?" he asked, mockingly. "Rain like this—for nine months, from now on. Lovely, *romantic* rain! The artist in you will appreciate it. Well—I expect you'll be wanting to return to town. I'll call a car for you."

Under the porte-cochere, with his hand on the door of the plantation coupe, he smiled again. "Come out tomorrow morning, Turner," he said. "We'll set up our—business deal, and I'll show you your duties."

Barton was playing for keeps on our wager; that much was clear within a few days after I went to work in his laboratory. Also, I began to understand that he was an extremely shrewd man with considerable grasp of practical psychology.

He set out, from the first, to irritate me and keep me irritated, and on edge. He went about it in a score of different ways. Conversation, for example.

"I wonder if you realize what this little experience is doing to you, Scott?" he said, with nasty joviality, one morning during my second month. "Do you see what you're heading for? A laboratory stoop, my boy, that's what. And this rain will grow mold in those curly artist locks of yours! Doesn't the thought bother you?"

Or—"You're getting quite a squint, Scott, peering at the labels on those test-tubes. You know, you're hardly a romantic figure, any more, old boy. Somehow, I can't *quite* imagine the laboratory drudge you've become, striding through Angkor Vat, or watching the gulls' wings over Majorca!"

He did other, more ingenious things, such as requiring me to do ten duplicate entries, in original, of the developments on each of his laboratory operations. He knew I knew it was unnecessary work, and he took a meticulous delight in keeping me at grinding, minute detail.

"Our bet specified *useful* work," I protested once, at the start.

"I believe I'm to be the judge of that, am I not?" he said.

The weeks ran into one another like the colors in a wet wash painting. Day and night, there was the drumming roar of the rain, punctuated by intervals of surcease which brought no relief, for then there was the endless drip-drip-drip from the eaves, until each drip was a separate, intolerable sting.

In the laboratory, among the mixed odors of chemicals and moist, thick earth-and-plant smells, I spent my days. I lived in a small bachelor suite adjoining the lab. I was free to be in the main house if I liked, but after dropping in once or twice, I didn't go back. Barton made no attempt to be sociable or even civilized, away from the lab. He kept to himself.

As for Ada Barton—she disap-

peared almost completely from my ken. For two months, I literally did not speak a single word to her. I hardly saw her; twice or three times, perhaps, at a distance.

Two months of this kind of thing—rain, drudging, eye-exhausting work, Barton's malicious jibes and stabs while I was at work and I awakened one morning with the realization I was utterly exhausted after a supposed night's "rest," that I faced another day in the lab with utter horror, and that just two months of my year had passed.

Ten more months of this kind of thing! What sort of man would I be, at the end of twelve months?

That morning, the rain stopped for awhile. Barton and I were at work as usual, in the lab. For a wonder, he was silent, and there was no sound but the eternal drip-drip-drip.

Suddenly the door opened. I glanced up, and saw Ada.

She was even more beautiful than I remembered her. The wet and dampness seemed to have had a fertilizing effect on her; she had expanded, bloomed, like a tropic plant.

She wore some kind of rough, shapeless peasant gown, and heavy sandals, but her whole body and face, her dark-red, parted lips and great, dark eyes glistened like the wet vegetation of the jungle. Her mouth widened in a slow smile as she saw my stare.

"Hello, Scott," she said.

It was the first time she had used my first name. She considered me,

arms akimbo. "You know," she said, "you *are* getting a squint. And your shoulders *do* look stooped."

She spoke to Barton. "Paul, I'm taking the car into town this afternoon."

"Just as you like, Ada."

"Thank you, dear." She grinned at me. "Silent, aren't we, Scott?"

Then the door was shut and she was gone.

I think it was in that instant I sensed that Paul Barton's needling of me, his insistent petty digging, were not entirely his own idea. I began to understand why I hadn't seen Ada since the night of our bet. And I began to wonder why Ada wanted me to hate Paul . . .

I must admit that Barton drove himself more mercilessly than any of his field workers. He habitually spent the afternoons in the fields, regardless of the rain. I was left alone in the lab from lunch until evening.

This same afternoon, as I bent over a ledger of entries, I heard the door open behind my table.

"Hello, Scott," Ada's voice said, softly.

I looked up from my work, without turning around.

"Hello," I said.

"I must say you're not very polite."

The next thing, she'd stepped to my table, hoisted herself onto it, and was swinging her feet and laughing down at me.

"I thought you were going into town," I said.

"Did I say that?"

"I heard something to that effect—and so did Paul."

"Well, the road's a swamp . . . and besides there's something wrong with the car . . . some *wire*."

I got up and started to put away some cultures.

"Of course, you wouldn't know which wire," I said.

"Well, I don't know what it's for. But if it's broken, the car won't run. I know that."

She swung lightly off the table and came to stand beside me. I caught a breath of scent, not like any perfume I knew, more the fresh earthy fragrance of a rain-wet jungle flower.

"Must you keep on working?" she said. "It certainly *is* very impolite of you."

"These cultures have to be put away."

She leaned against the table, very close. "You know, Scott, this business of your bet with Paul shocks me."

"It does, eh?"

"Yes. It shocks me to see what he's doing to you."

"It shocks *me* to see what you're doing to him, Ada," I said bluntly.

She ignored that. "Why do you take it from him? Why do you stay here?"

I looked her in the eyes. "When I made the bet with Paul," I said, "I thought I knew the answer to that one. I thought you knew it, too, Ada. But now I think I was wrong."

"Were you, Scott . . . ?"

"Now," I told her, "I think it's just stubbornness—that, and fifty thousand dollars."

She made a soft sound of derision. "Fifty thousand dollars isn't really a motive—not for a man like you, Scott."

"Oh, yes, it is," I said. "I'm just crass, Ada."

"You *must* have another motive in staying." She was at my elbow, nearly touching me, and I was aware of her, the soft whisper of her breathing.

"Not even me, Scott . . . ?"

"Damn it, you know it was you, that first day—I wanted you then—"

"And you don't, now? Is that it?"

"See here, Ada!" I moved back a step, away from her. "What are you doing to Paul? What have you got in mind for him? You married him—why don't you give him a break? Why don't you give him something—or leave him?"

She was beside me again. "Why don't you kiss me, Scott?" Her dark-red lips parted. "Well . . . ?"

I wanted to. But even had I not, my will wasn't a factor any longer—not with those tropical petals of warm lips open almost against *my* lips. She was in my arms, all the lithe, long, golden body under the shapeless robe . . .

All the things I had thought about Ada Barton that first day in Siam Bramachari's shop, among the scented sandalwood and shadows, came true, one by one.

THINGS get known. Perhaps the house servants noticed Ada's afternoon absences; perhaps they saw her entering or leaving the lab. It was out of sight of the house, behind a small thick clump of garden in which Paul grew botanical specimens. But there were the gardeners and field hands. And natives are inveterate gossips.

I'm sure now Ada intended it to be that way. She meant for Paul to hear sniggers, get scraps of gossip, surprise scornful glances.

Before long I knew that he knew; it was implicit in the added sting of things he said, the looks he gave me, the very inflections of otherwise ordinary remarks.

And then, while I was still trying to decide what to do about it when it came—as it must—to an issue, Ada made her proposal.

She suggested the thing so casually that I wasn't certain I had heard it rightly. She misinterpreted my silence.

"Five hundred thousand dollars, Scott—think of it, darling! Half a million! And I'm his beneficiary—just me."

"You can't mean it, Ada. My God, all our lives . . ."

"It's so simple, Scott." She sat on the edge of the bed in my little apartment, pinning up her hair. "So quick and easy. And after that—the rest of our lives."

"We can very easily wait a little while," I pointed out. "Another nine months, I'll win my wager from Paul, you can leave him, and—"

"Nine months! I won't wait, Scott! I can't wait that long. What do you think it's been like, being married to Paul Barton for even a year?"

"What did you marry him for?" I challenged.

"Do you think you can get me for fifty thousand dollars, Scott?" she laughed. "Oh, no. I have some rather odd tastes, Scott—rather interesting tastes, I think you'll agree, but it costs money to gratify them. Shall we explore them together, Scott—or are you afraid?"

"We couldn't get away with it."

"But, Scott—" She was as casual as a girl planning a picnic—"you haven't let me tell you how we *can*."

"When a man's insured for half a million, his death's sure to be investigated."

"But—"

"And insurance investigators are thorough. They won't accept your 'grief'—no matter how convincingly you act it out. They wouldn't accept my being here, either. They'd talk to the servants, find out who and why."

"They'd find nothing that isn't on the death certificate. Listen to me, Scott—"

I sat down beside her on the bed. "Darling, *don't* try to talk me into this."

"Listen, Scott. Besides malaria, there are two diseases in Trinidad that kill hundreds every year, typhoid and amoeba hystolytica. You see, I've done a little research."

"No, Ada, I won't—"



"Paul's healthy. He might recover from either one, alone—but if he had both, together . . ."

"Ada," I said, "Paul is due back very soon, now. You'd better go."

"Now," she went on, "you go to the hospital at least once a week, for lab supplies. You must have seen where they keep specimens—typhoid cultures, amoeba . . ."

"The risk, Ada, . . .!"

"You won't gamble for those stakes, Scott? You'll be rich. You'll have *me*." She leaned her fragrant body against me. "Is that nothing?" She proceeded to do several things which she did extremely well.

"Is that nothing . . .?" she asked again, a little later.

"My God, Ada, of course—"

"Scott, you *do* know where they keep the specimens!"

"Of course, but—"

"You'll get them, then, won't you? Won't you, Scott?"

I broke away from her, and paced the room.

"Ada . . . let me think about it a little while," I pleaded. "Let me at least pretend I'm a man with a conscience."

"You've got a conscience, Scott," she said slowly, smiling tenderly at me. "But you're no fool, either."

"Certainly not enough to want Paul to find us here together," I said roughly. "You've got to get out of here, instantly, Ada!"

At the door she turned. "Think about it, Paul!" she said gaily. "Until tomorrow . . ."

I didn't think about it. For the

first time since coming to Trinidad, I got drunk.

**W**HEN the lab door opened the next afternoon, I almost said "Hello, Ada" before I looked around.

It was Paul, in riding clothes spattered with mud from the cane fields.

"Oh . . . hello, Paul. I wasn't expecting you this afternoon."

"I'm quite sure you weren't," he said matter-of-factly. "You were expecting Ada." Before I could say anything, he added, "Well, she's here, too."

"Hello, Scott," said Ada, from behind his back.

I said "Hello."

Even in my discomfiture, I noticed that he looked badly. There were weary lines in his face, and his voice dispensed with double meanings, for once.

He looked all around the room. Finally he said:

"I just stopped by to tell you I've got to go to Tobago."

"Tobago?"

"Yes. I've got a grinding plant there, and we're installing a new engine. Be gone a couple of days, anyway."

"I told Paul Tobago—in this weather . . ." Ada pushed into the room, past him.

He gestured impatiently. "I take enough quinine to keep on the right side of malaria. I'll be all right."

"Yes, darling, but there are other things—typhoid . . ."

He turned to look at her.

"I've never known you to be con-

cerned before, Ada . . ."

"Why, Paul . . ."

A bit of the old edge crept into his voice. "If it weren't for—certain other factors—I'd be touched. Believe me."

She was candid as a child. "What other factors, Paul?"

"Oh, come now, Ada! I don't care to be sordid. Surely I don't have to go into detail on a situation you and Scott know far better than—"

"Paul!"

He shrugged, smiling faintly. "Oh, very well—we'll maintain the cultivated surface, if you wish." He moved over to the desk, picked up a test tube and inspected the label on it, turning it over in his hands.

"By the way, Scott," he said, "how do you feel now about our bet?"

"The same as before," I said. "I'll win it."

"Yes? Well, perhaps. Lately, I've thought the whole thing was a mistake—on my part, at least."

"I see," I said. "You want to call it off?"

Overhead, the roar of the rain was commencing again, accompanied by the familiar spatter of water off the eaves.

"I didn't say that," he replied, raising his voice to be heard. "Tell you what—we'll talk about it, when I get back, the three of us. I may have a counter proposal."

"All right," I agreed, "we'll talk about it."

"Fine!" I'll be looking forward to it. He turned to his wife. "Well, Ada . . .?"

"I think I'll wait here for the rain to stop," she answered calmly. "Do you mind?"

"And if I did?" Then, without waiting for reply, he added "Good-bye," and stepped out into the down-pour.

The door was hardly shut behind him when she'd whirled on me like a tigress.

"You heard! You see!"

"He's a little excited, Ada," I started to say. "It didn't mean anything—"

"Don't be a fool! You heard what he said. It means you haven't any choice, now."

I tried to keep my hands from trembling as I lit a cigarette. "Oh, there's always a choice . . ."

She strode across the small room at me. I say "at me," because it was like that; her tremendous vitality and determination fairly drove her toward me.

She stopped in front of me. She was wearing jodhpurs and boots and she planted her legs wide apart and set her hands on her hips.

"Well, yes," she said, in a drawl that uncoiled like a taut spring. "You *have* a choice. You can choose between me and half a million dollars, or nothing—not one red cent!"

"He didn't say he wouldn't pay," I faltered.

"Didn't say!" she mocked. "No—but that's what he means! He hates us, Scott, both of us, and his only weapon is his money. What a triumph for him . . . to hoax you into slaving here this long, and then throw you

out. How he'll laugh!"

"He wouldn't dare . . ."

"Wouldn't he! I *know* him, Scott! Your only chance is to do what I say—now."

I heard my own voice say "But how will you give it to him . . . the . . . microbes?"

She sat on the edge of the table, one booted foot swinging. "That's more like it. Listen, now—in his food. It needs only a drop. In caviar, say. He's a pig for it, loves it . . . caviar highly seasoned with onions and worcestershire sauce."

"But when . . .?"

"When he gets back—probably day after tomorrow. He'll ask you to the house for tea, to talk over his 'proposal.' I'll give it to him then, and it will look as though he caught it in Tobago."

I tried, a last time. "Ada, I'm not sure . . ."

She gripped me by the shoulders.

"Do you love me, Scott?"

I didn't answer. No answer was needed.

After a moment she said, "Good. You'll get the specimens."

As she was leaving, she said: "Be very careful, when the time comes, darling . . . eat only the caviar *without* onions."

THE afternoon Paul came back, the rain stopped. What's more, it didn't start again, as the day wore on; and there was a feeling abroad that it wasn't going to start again. The rainy season was done.

The sun did not come out; a

white mist crawled along the ground and hung in the drenched foliage of the forest-patches. The plantation was silent, and in the botanical garden water dripped loudly from the giant Igoron trees. But now and then a faraway shout from a native workman to his fellow rang with a glad note. The rains were over . . .

I potted in my quarters, nerves strung taut, until close to the hour for tea. I kept thinking of Paul, at the house, and the little flask of colorless liquid I had given Ada, and caviar with onions.

"He's a pig for it . . ." she had said.

Finally, with a glance at the hands of my watch, I closed the lab door behind me and walked toward the house, through the crawling, hip-deep mists. It was precisely on the hour as I rang the bell.

Ada met me at the door . . . in magnificently-cut full white slacks and blouse. Never had she set herself off to more arresting advantage.

"In my special room, Scott," she said softly. "We're having tea in there." At the door she whispered, "Remember . . . the onions."

The "special room" was the one where she kept her Hindu god-figures, set around the walls. I noticed the white jade Siva I recalled so well; he was against a curtain of indoor-growing green creepers.

Paul rose as I came in.

"Well, you've come," he said. He sounded surprised.

"You asked me," I reminded him.

"Of course. But you surprise me

again. You're as punctual as you are stubborn."

Ada's finger tips lingered lightly across the carven surfaces of the white Siva.

"I have some caviar," she said. "I'll get it. Help yourself to tea, Scott." She left the room.

"I'm sorry," I said to Paul, "that I disappoint you so often."

"Disappoint me?"

"By failing to conform to your ideas of what an artist should be."

He laughed lightly. "Oh! That's not where I misjudged. No, I had a preconceived portrait of . . . of the kind of man my wife thinks she wants." He paused a moment. "She wants a fool and a weakling," he said, shortly.

"See here, Paul," I began, "I won't sit here and take—"

"Here's the caviar." She was back in the room again, calm, charming, the perfect hostess. "There." She set it on the low, mahogany coffee table. "With onions—here; and without, in this dish. And some new crackers from New York, for Paul. Scott, you'll enjoy these native pastries; you love sweets, don't you?"

"You're right, at that, Scott." Paul was thoughtful. "We won't discuss that. It's beside the point. What we were going to discuss was my counter proposal."

"Paul," protested Ada. "Let's enjoy ourselves for a few minutes. Not more unpleasantness . . ."

"You assume it's unpleasant. What I was about to say, though"—he spoke to me—"is that I'm closing the

laboratory. Ada, will you push the crackers over this way . . .? Thank you."

"I'd like to hear your reason," I said.

I felt suddenly quite calm.

He was equally calm. "Very simple reason. The research is no longer necessary—and, I want you to leave Trinidad, Scott."

"One moment," I said. "We had an agreement—a bet. Remember?"

"Ah, yes . . . that." Cracker in hand, he inspected the low table. "Ah . . . caviar and onions. My wife prepares this very well, Scott."

"My end of it," I said, "was to stay here and work for you for one year."

With a small silver spreading knife he smeared a heavy gob of the onion-flavored black stuff on a cracker.

"Well, about that, now," he said, poisoning the tidbit in his hand, "you're thinking of the money, of course . . ." He broke off. "Really, Scott, try this, with onions. Ada puts *everything* in it . . . all sorts of things."

He paused, about to lift the cracker to his lips, and caught my fixed stare. "What—did I say something?"

"Put it down, Paul!" I said, sharply.

"Eh . . . I beg your . . ."

"Put that cracker down!"

"Scott, you fool!"

She was on her feet, her back to the Siva, a tall, white figure dominating us two men. I slapped the cracker from Paul's hand. He stared at me.

"There *is* everything in it, Paul." I



glanced at her, found I could smile. "Your wife gave you your usual onions—with just a dash of amoeba hystolytica."

"Is this true, Ada . . .?"

The beautiful mask did not smile. The lips twisted, flung out words. "Do you think I want to go on living with you, dull, aging, half-dead?" She turned on me. "Or you, traitor!"

It was a voice from a cold, waking nightmare. In her long, strong fingers a gun snuggled, a blunt-muzzled automatic.

"Eat some of the caviar, Scott."

"You can say that—to me, Ada?"

"*You* made the choice, Scott. Go on—eat it. *With* onions, Scott."

I looked at the steady, unwavering weapon. I picked up the silver teaspoon, dug it into the viscous black stuff, carried it slowly to my lips.

I looked at Ada.

She gestured imperatively with the pistol.

"Keep on, Scott. *Eat it!*"

I put the spoon in my mouth, brought it out again—empty. The stuff *was* delicious, with onions . . .

"Delicious," I said, nodding my head. "May I . . .?"

I spooned up another load and ate it.

"Better without crackers than with, I think."

The mask of beauty was cracking. Ada Barton's lovely, sultry mouth sagged in commonplace lines of utter amazement. The automatic's muzzle drooped microscopically.

"Scott!" The cracking note of unbelief in her voice was commonplace,

too. "Did you——"

"—Get hystolytica from the hospital? No, Ada. I decided sterile jelly would be . . . safer."

"You fool, you stupid, cowardly fool!" Contempt crackled in her words like a whip. "To think that I saw you as a romantic figure—*you!*"

I smiled. "I'm not so romantic, Ada, but I'm no fool. I knew about you long before I ever reached Trinidad. How many men *have* you killed, Ada? How many silly, fascinated men have helped you kill, and then died themselves?"

"What do you mean?" the gun's muzzle was like a rock, now, its blank, black eye looking straight at me. I tried not to look at it.

"You see, I was sent here by Royal Indemnity and Assurance—my employers, Ada . . . to investigate . . . because of the very, very bad luck your husbands seem to have."

The lovely lips curled.

"An insurance man. How . . . how dismal. How *shoddy*. It makes me hate you all the more. I hate to confer even this last dignity of . . . death . . ."

A gun spoke three times, then—only it wasn't Ada's gun.

Paul Barton sat slumped in the fan-backed rattan chair, staring at the thread of gray-blue smoke drifting upward from the muzzle of a small, pearl-mounted pistol in his hand.

I looked at Ada. There was a red splotch on the white silk of her blouse, that widened as I watched. Her face sagged and drooped, like a withering orchid.

The automatic clattered on the parquet floor. Ada's legs in the long white slacks bent, then buckled, under her. She fell, forward, across the coffee table. Her lion-yellow hair lay in undone strands, among the tea things.

Paul Barton stood up and came to stand beside the table. Stooping, he drew the yellow tresses together about the lovely head.

He straightened and regarded me out of empty eyes.

"Well, Scott—our bet is off, I think."

"I guess it is—Paul."

My glance went to the gun in his hand, and he saw the look. He laid it on the table, and smiled bleakly.

"She was easy to love, wasn't she, Scott—even in the line of duty?"

I reached for the telephone.

## POISON IS FOR WEAKLINGS

Poison

Is for weaklings.

Strangling

Is for sadists.

A man will face his problem  
straightly:

A club,

A pipe,

A rock

In vengeful fist,

Arcing in lethal swing

For the last oblivion

Of the unknowing;

A shot from ambush—

Or face to face—

To close the accounts

Of one John Doe.

Along these ways lies honesty.

But poison

Is a meaching thing,

Used by those

Who cannot face

Reality.

Poison

Is for sissies,

Strangling

For sadists.

— HONEST JOHN